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ABSTRACT

Paralleling the interest among researchers in naturalistic inquiry is a resurgence in action research, and particularly in research which involves the collaboration of researchers and research subjects. This paper locates the negotiation of research outcomes between researcher and subject on a continuum, with the separation of researcher and subject on one extreme and collaboration between researcher and subject on the other. Data (transcripts of a reflective log, audiotaped by the principal, interviews, observations, and school documents) were collected on three elementary school principals over a nine month period. The purpose of the research was to understand the ecology of administrative decision making. The analytic categories constituting overlapping domains of professional knowledge were investigated using one principal's experience. Special emphasis was given to the use of generative metaphor as an analytic tool. The instance of negotiation that is described demonstrates how a researcher and practitioner can achieve consensus on the appropriateness of analytic categories that attempt to describe the social reality of educational practitioners. (Author/BAE)

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NEGOTIATING ORGANIZATIONAL REALITY: A CASE STUDY OF MUTUAL VALIDATION OF RESEARCH OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

This paper locates the negotiation of research outcomes between researcher and subject on a continuum with the separation of researcher and subject on one extreme, and collaboration between researcher and subject on the other. The process of negotiation is documented by the authors with special emphasis on the use of generative metaphor as an analytic tool. The instance of negotiation described is intended to demonstrate how a researcher and practitioner can achieve consensus on the appropriateness of analytic categories that attempt to describe the social reality of educational practitioners.

Since the mid 1970's the study of the principalship and the field of educational administration generally have begun to move away from a preponderance of survey-type questionnaire studies and toward a variety of naturalistic approaches (Thomas, 1986). Adaptations of ethnographic (Wolcott, 1985; Donmoyer, 1985), sociolinguistic (Levine et al., 1984), and life history (Gronn, 1982) methods to educational administration are proliferating. One issue common to all of these more naturalistic modes of inquiry is the nature of the relationship between the researcher and his/her research subjects and their respective contributions to the construction of meaning. Although this issue has been taken for granted by cultural anthropologists - at least since Malinowski - researchers in the field of educational administration have only recently begun to view practitioners more as cultural informants than as objects of study.

Paralleling the post-positivist interest among researchers in naturalistic inquiry, there has been a resurgence of interest in action research and particularly in research which involves the collaboration of researchers and research subjects. Many researchers have returned to Lewin's original work on action research and to a longstanding, but until recently largely ignored, body of work in phenomenology and hermeneutics. This burgeoning interest in the lifeworld of the research subject/practitioner has largely been led by feminists attempting to legitimate the subjective experience of women, and by researchers in applied fields attempting to bridge the worlds of theory and practice. In education Lincoln and Guba (1985) make negotiation of outcomes among all research participants one of the

defining characteristics of naturalistic inquiry. Others have gone even further, claiming that action research strategies may represent a new epistemological basis for social research (Peters and Robinson, 1984).

The issue of how much participation the research subject will have in a naturalistic study is not an either/or proposition, but as figure 1 illustrates the options open to the researcher can best be viewed falling on a continuum which runs from viewing the separation of researcher and subject as a virtue on one end to viewing researcher-subject collaboration as desireable on the other.

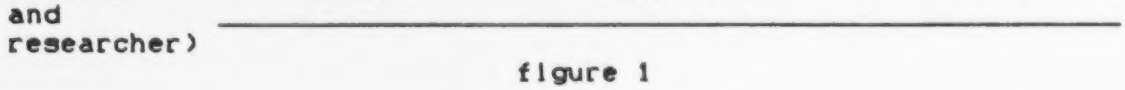

figure 1

In nearly all forms of naturalistic inquiry, whether they are called ethnographies, field studies or qualitative case studies, some form of systematic checking of one's reconstruction of observed reality with that of the subject is built into the methodology. This is generally accomplished through emic-oriented research methods which, to the extent possible, attempt to gain access to the lifeworld of the research subject. Perhaps the most common methods are; becoming a participant observer, progressive focusing of interviews, and offering interview transcripts or observation summaries for review by subjects, giving them the opportunity to change or add to the data. These practices recognize that the researchers raw data is not merely descriptive, but involves an interpretive act as the researcher

attempts to reconstruct the constructs of the subject through inferences that are based on interviews, observed behavior and discourse. Thus, in most naturalistic studies some form of validation of meaning between the researcher and subject is present. This paper, while acknowledging the importance of methods that allow for such ongoing validation, seeks also to explore a more formal process of validation which involves negotiation of meaning and provides the research subject with a more direct role in the research process. This approach carries with it some important questions. When agreement about the meaning of data cannot be reached, whose constructs are given priority? Does the researcher have an unfair advantage in the negotiation process? If, as Benne (1976) suggests, we are negotiating across two separate cognitive worlds, that of the researcher and that of the practitioner, won't research "findings" simply reflect a lack of common perspectives, purposes, and interests as Phillips (1980) has suggested?

In light of the above, it should be stated at the outset that the research study on which this paper is based was not in any full sense collaborative, nor was the elementary principal who was the subject of the research interested in engaging in action research. (Although she freely would admit that involvement in the study was "good therapy" and resulted in a deepened appreciation and understanding of her role.) Unlike collaborative action research, in which negotiation between researcher and subject-as-co-researcher begins at the outset as questions are being formulated, this study did not engage the subject in formal negotiation until preliminary categories and themes

had been identified midway through the study. Nevertheless, regardless of where a naturalistic study falls on the continuum illustrated in figure 1, it seems fair to assume that some form of negotiation of meaning leading to mutual validation of research outcomes is called for. Therefore the issues raised in this paper and the need for a continued dialogue around the negotiation of meaning in naturalistic inquiry seems warranted.

The Principal Study

Data for the principal study was collected on three principals over a nine month period and included transcripts of a reflective log audiotaped by the principal, interview and observational data, and school documents. The purpose of the research was to understand the ecology of administrative decision-making; that is, how principals make sense of their ecological context as they make decisions and confront problematic situations, as well as how they may come to frame a situation as problematic in the first place. In an effort to better understand the ecology of the principal's decision-making, a knowledge of the perspectives of the various significant others in the principal's environment, as well as some knowledge of the power structure of the district, was necessary. For this reason interviews were done with central office personnel, school board members, special interest groups, parents, teachers, aids, secretaries, and students. Nevertheless, because we were interested in how these contextual factors were perceived by the principal, we began to view the

principal as a key informant and thus the negotiation process in this study was carried out exclusively with the principal. The report was, however, shared with a teacher and a central office administrator before writing the final draft.

It was hypothesized that how principals approach discrete instances of decision-making will depend on how they frame the social reality of the organization and its environment. In other words situations exist for the administrator to the extent that s/he imposes meaning on them. Thus, organizational "reality" is in this sense imposed meaning and decisions may appear random or meaningless unless understod in this way.

It also became clear during the study that the meaning a principal imposes on a given situation depends on the interaction between the situation itself and what we chose to call the practitioner's "professional knowledge". We knew that the "professional knowledge" that principals drew on for making discrete decisions varied among principals because of their differing ecological contexts and we wanted to describe in some detail how principals sifted through that knowledge in order to arrive at decisions. The principals' reflective logs together with observational and interview data gave us a good sense of this sifting process and reminded us that over time principals had developed broad frames of reference that grew out of their own particular contexts - both personal and professional - and which guided the sifting process and served as a normative foundation for approaching decisions. Therefore, we were interested first in negotiating the analytic

categories that constituted the various overlapping domains of "professional knowledge" for each principal, and then to negotiate the broad frames of reference that each principal used and which were, we felt, generally revealed through the metaphors that the principals used to describe their practice. The rest of this paper will report the negotiation of these domains and metaphors with one of the elementary principals whom we have called Kathy Martin.

Ongoing Validation: Rapport and Progressive Focusing

It is important to stress that formal negotiation does not replace the ways naturalistic researchers currently engage in ongoing validation with subjects. Negotiation of research outcomes cannot take place in a study that is not grounded in emic-oriented methods. It is crucial that some form of validation take place, at least with key informants, throughout data collection, or developing categories and themes may become so skewed by the time formal negotiations take place that they are rendered useless. This process of validation is similar to what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call "focused exploration" and the immediate and more informal stages of member checking, "whereby data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stakeholding groups from whom the data were originally collected. (p. 314) This ongoing process of validation requires the development of rapport with the subjects as well as a progressive focusing of data.

Spradley (1980) describes the rapport process as proceeding through developmental stages moving toward a relationship of trust and cooperation between researcher and informant. Once Kathy Martin had understood the purpose of the study, she would often volunteer information she felt might be relevant, suggest certain key groups or individuals in the community for future interviews or observations, or tell the researcher about upcoming meetings or events that would be relevant to the study. But most importantly, as trust built she began to become less protective of her image. In fact, there were moments in which she would say things like, "Well, I don't really like that particular interpretation because it is unflattering, but I'm willing to honestly consider it." This is particularly important for school administrators, who have nothing to gain and everything to lose by sharing candid information with a researcher who has not established trustworthiness.

Progressive focusing occurs in a number of ways. Follow up interviews become progressively more structured and purposeful; new sources of data are identified; and disconfirming evidence is sought for working hypotheses. In these and other ways an ongoing three-way dialogue is established among the researcher, the research subjects, and the data. Most often this dialogue is embedded in the researcher's attempt to fill in missing data, ask probing follow-up questions, and select appropriate sites for observation.

Negotiation of the Case Study and Analytic Categories.

The categories of Kathy's professional knowledge were reported midway through the study in the form of a matrix with supporting data and again at the end of the study in a case study narrative. The narrative presented relatively few problems for negotiation since the categories were well grounded in the feedback we had gotten from our matrix and also because of its abundance of detail and supporting data which had been carefully triangulated among the various significant others in Kathy's environment. It was relatively easy for Kathy to correct factual errors, suggest refinements in our interpretations, or call our attention to some aspects of her professional knowlege that were insufficiently stressed or missing altogether. Negotiation of the case study report was done in two separate sessions about two weeks apart.

Because of our level of trust and the groundedness of our interpretations, negotiations went smoothly and we were able to essentially argue our cases as if presenting evidence in a court of law or in a simplified version of what Levine (1974) calls an "adversary model", which is based on the assumption that legal proceedings are well designed to deal with the complexity of human events in research settings.

Kathy, in some respects, was at a disadvantage in these proceedings, because, although she had the knowledge of her environment at her fingertips, negotiation involved bringing the tacit level of her knowledge to the fore in such a way that she was able to

reflect on it. Although Kathy was in the habit of regularly reflecting on her practice, she, nevertheless, would occasionally sense that we had "gotten it wrong" without being able to say exactly how. In most of these cases Kathy was able at a later time to express the reasons for her disagreement. In order to give Kathy an opportunity for further reflection, some follow-up negotiation occured by phone after the last meeting.

Our most interesting and lengthy disagreement was over what at the time we called a theme and later began referring to as a perceptual frame. Because this particular instance of negotiation involved an attempt to characterize Kathy's normative foundation or underlying assumptions about her organizational environment, and because it led to a major restructuring of one of our interpretive categories, we will use this instance as a kind of case study of a particular instance of negotiation.

Metaphors as Conceptual Frames

The negotiation of perceptual frames was aided by the use of generative metaphors which Schon (1980) defines as "carrying over of frames or perspectives from one domain of experience to another." (p. 254) The generative quality of such metaphors resides in their ability to generate new perceptions and explanations of problematic situations. Schon provides an example of this process from the study of social policies related to urban housing. Some policy-makers have used a disease metaphor for urban slum areas, viewing them as blighted

and therefore, in need of eradication and urban renewal. Other policy analysts have countered with a natural community or urban village metaphor, insisting that the dislocation of residents from local communities would destroy the patterns of interaction and informal networks that provide the basis for effective social functioning. According to Schon,

> Each story constructs its view of social reality through a complementary process of naming and framing. Things are selected for attention and named in such a way as to fit the frame constructed for the situation. Together, the two processes construct a problem out of the vague and indeterminate reality which John Dewey (1938) called the 'problematic situation.' They carry out the essential problem-setting functions. They select for attention a few salient features and relations from what would otherwise be an overwhelmingly complex reality. (p. 264)

Once it becomes apparent that the above metaphors or stories do not represent "reality", but are two different ways of making sense of social life, then they become tools for critical inquiry. Thus, rather than confusing such metaphors with "reality", we can bring them into conscious awareness and use them to reflect on how social reality is constructed by different social actors.

As previously mentioned, midway through the study, preliminary categories and themes were developed and discussed with Kathy, who, with some refinements, was able to validate most of them, but disagreed strenuously with our general view of her environment as treacherous and unsafe. We had amassed data as evidence in which she spoke of tremendous stress, sleepless nights, potential lawsuits, and constant strategizing. She had indicated that her meetings with

fellow principals were a "safe place" because, as she put it, "she knew that things would be held in confidence there." Extrapolating from her use of "safe place" to describe the haven the principal group provided her, we began to use the metaphor "unsafe place" to describe her organizational environment, viewing it as a battlefield strewn with landmines which Kathy had to daily negotiate with great care. Kathy, although she acknowledged the validity of the supporting data we presented, could not relate at all to our characterization of her environment. She viewed her relationships in the district as generally very amicable, particularly those that involved her staff, parents and immediate boss, and that with few exceptions she viewed her environment as quite safe. Aware of the threat of what some phenomenologists call the researchers "colonization of the lifeworld of the subject" and thus, eager to respect the research subject's views, we returned to the data in the hope of either building a stronger argument for our story or developing a new story that would more effectively explain the data.

In reviewing our data, we realized that Kathy was right. This was a suburban district that worked hard at promoting good supportive human relations and real conflict appeared rare. There was much talk about defusing conflict by "working it through" so that both parties could come away feeling like "winners". A new story began to emerge centering around a "family" metaphor. Everyone from central office personnel to teachers used this metaphor frequently, although at central office it sometimes became a "team" or "unit" metaphor. The following are examples of data that reflect the family orientation:

Quote from an interview with Kathy Martin: "When I first came in as principal the major focus was the staff, and, you know, for a principal it really needs to be the staff, no matter what the decision is, staff cohesiveness - even into things like smoking in the teachers lounge - is all part of keeping the staff together as a FAMILY and working together for the good of kids."

Quote from an interview with a teacher: "There used to be a lot of factions among staff. At one point it was like we were pulling in all directions and all of a sudden it just sort of pulled together, and it's like the whole FAMILY has pulled together."

Segment from field notes of an informal conversation with a teacher: "We talked about Kathy being protective of her staff. She (the teacher) spoke of a 'nurturing environment' and of Kathy being directly responsible for it."

Reanalysis of the data in the light of Kathy's feedback did, then, reveal another metaphor that provided Kathy with a perceptual frame with which to approach decisions. As data collection progressed both stories, that which told of an unsafe environment ("I know that there are things out there - right outside that door - that could knock me down in a minute. You never get cocky in this job.") as well as that which told of a generally supportive community, loyal staff, and a generally trusting relationship with the central office.

As researcher, I had come to the study with a bias toward a conflict paradigm of social reality in which conflicts of interest are resolved throught the exercise of political power. Kathy, on the other hand, tended to view disputes as the result of differing perceptions which could generally be resolved through communication or "talking it through" to a mutually satisfactory compromise. For this reason my "unsafe place" metaphor seemed overdrawn to Kathy, and although I had noticed the metaphors of family and cohesiveness

earlier, I had largely dismissed them as mere rhetoric that served to mask the conflict and dissention in the district. Thus, when I returned to the data, I "saw" the family metaphor for the first time as an analytic category.

Once Kathy was able to get me to take her perceptual frame seriously and I was able to convince her that the "unsafe" metaphor was also operating, we were then able to move on to the negotiation of a frame that would accurately account for how she approached her complex organizational reality.

In the following exchange Kathy and I are struggling to understand how the conflicting metaphors might be restructured:

> Kathy - Sometimes you have a joyous thing - you've achieved some success. But that next phone call could just make you go down again. I don't know, you never quite maintain a high in this job. And I think that's affected my personality somewhat. I was always an optimist and always a pretty high type person, lots of energy. And I find that now I get pretty worn out a lot, and things don't thrill me as much as they used to.
>
> Researcher - I feel like the unsafe place metaphor is operating but I'm not sure how it fits in, and what you seem to be saying is, yes, the stress is there and the...
>
> Kathy - Well, look, a part of unsafe is that there are certain things I would never say to my staff that I might say to a couple of my colleagues because you need to let it out.
>
> Researcher - And that's stress provoking.
>
> Kathy - Well sure, I mean it's stressful that you can't say it to them. Sometimes I'll get so angry and I'll think, 'just do your job and quit balking', or something like that, whereas I can say that to a couple of my principal colleagues and its a way I let it out so when I come back to these folks, I can deal with them in the way I know I need to deal with them.

Researcher - Is this partly a hierarchy or accountability issue where you can't just say to your staff go ahead and do what you want, because that also reflects on you and the school.

Kathy - Oh yes, like the state evaluation thing. If my staff hadn't followed through on that, that would have been me, that would have been my fault if they hadn't. I mean not that it's said, 'that's your fault', but I know if they hadn't pulled through on that...

Researcher - So bureaucray is a fact of life; hierarchy is a fact of life; and there is a certain amount of pressure that comes from being part of a hierarchy?

Kathy - Right

Researcher - So in a sense that kind of stress is inherent because of the accountability that occurs at each level. Now, it seems the way this district deals with that - and rather effectively - is, in order to cut down on the impersonality of the bureaucracy and accountability, to create a sense of cohesiveness at each level and to effectively but selectively funnel information up and down the hierarchy.

Kathy - Well, I don't think the funneling of the information would make it less.

Researcher - Yeah, you're right. That doesn't make sense. How about this? At each of these levels that idea of the family or unit or team metaphor is used to build the cohesiveness, but yet at the same time they are power bases or interest groups within the community?

Kathy goes on to describe how her staff can be an interest group in the district and can pull together at times to put pressure on Kathy as occured when coding lesson plans for state evaluation became too taxing. She also discusses how she must constantly decide what kind of information to share up and down the hierarchy and the burden of being privy to so much information and the need to share it selectively and effectively.

The above exchange moves negotiation along by placing the family and unsafe metaphors in a structural context. When organizational structure is taken into account, it becomes apparent that the family metaphor, although employed district-wide, is most convincing at each level of the organizational hierarchy, that is, as a "family" of teachers in a particular school, the central office "family" or "team", or the "unit" of elementary principals.

These "families", with their attendent solidarity and loyalty represent power bases within the community that may exert power within the organizational hierarchy as well as in relation to other special interest groups in the community. Another of Kathy's metaphors, principal as "funnel" for information and decisions within the school may also be applicable to those individuals who serve as links between the "families" at various levels of the hierarchy. There is then a pull for autonomy at the level of the "family" and yet a pull for tight coupling in order for information to flow between levels. The principal, then, must keep the "family" together and defend its autonomy while at the same time remain accountable to other levels of the hierarchy. It is this balancing act that creates the sense of impending danger for kathy, and the sheer amount of work that maintaining stability both within her building and between competing power bases within the hierarchy and the district that add to the stress.

Kathy's perceptual frame then seems to be more complex than it, at first, appeared. It involves viewing problematical situations both in terms of their effect on her ability to maintain the cohesiveness

of the "family" and in terms of their effect on her credibility and accountability within the hierarchy and the community at large. Although this appears to support much current research which views principals as attempting to satisfy role expectations for organizational maintenance and stability (Crowson & Porter-Gehrie, 1980; Bredeson, 1985), the metaphors that are used will vary from district to district and perhaps from building to building reflecting the idiosyncratic aspects of the local situation.

The Use of Metaphor as an Analytic Tool

Provided they are grounded in supporting data, metaphors can facilitate negotiation in a number of ways. First, metaphors provide researchers and practitioners with a common exploratory tool with a neutral language which can help to bridge the discourses of two distinct cognitive worlds. Second, educational administrators use metaphors often as a way of explaining, ordering, and drawing meaning from what sometimes appears a contradictory and inchoate social world. Third, metaphors possess a generative property; that is, they are heuristics for generating and exploring new questions and hypotheses.

With regard to the generativity of metaphor, however, care must be taken in their use. Our negotiation began with an attempt to analyze the family metaphor by attempting to extend it (ie. families have parents and children, neuroses, conflict, etc.). Such extension of practitioner metaphors is inappropriate because the intent of the metaphor is generally limited. In Kathy Martin's case, it became

apparent during negotiation that the family metaphor was not meant to be extended beyond its associations of loyalty, affect, and cohesiveness.

Pratte (1981) makes some helpful observations about the function that metaphors have for practitioners. First, one must distinguish between a metaphorical statement, which is limited in intent, and a metaphorical model, which is intended to be more isomorphic with the thing being compared. Whereas social theorists might build metaphorical models which attempt systematically to order social reality, practitioners tend to use them in less systematic ways.

Pratte further stresses that, once established, metaphors tend to implicitly define social reality and can be appealed to at the implicit level.

> "For a metaphor to work effectively, it must suppress some facts and highlight others. Consequently , a good metaphor produces a slanted "view" or "perspective", and a change in attitudes toward the "facts" can and often does result in a change in fact. This reallocation of the facts, when not recognized, may become a new reality." (p. 318)

One of the characteristics of the "family" and "team" metaphors was that, they tended to reveal some aspects of social reality and to conceal others. Because "family" and "team" connote positive images of harmony, loyalty, and lack of conflict and control, they serve to promote, along with participatory decision-making and an "everyone a winner" philosophy, a consensus view of social reality rather than a conflict view. This can have a positive effect on a school district in that it may reduce tensions, but it may also have a tendency to

conceal conflicts of interest that may exist within the district or between the district and the wider society.

Conclusion

The instance of negotiation described in this paper is intended to demonstrate how a researcher and practitioner can together achieve consensus on the appropriateness of analytic categories that attempt to describe the social reality of educational practitioners. If what Goetz and LeCompte (1986) call "interobserver reliability" among a team of researchers contributes to the internal reliability of naturalistic studies, it does not seem too implausible to suggest that even greater reliability might be achieved by considering key informants as co-observers. Such a definition of reliability may seem to suggest that collaborative forms of research which give priority to the constructs of practitioners is the ideal in all cases. The problem with this position is that it views the "insider's" constructs of social reality as superior to the "outsider's", turning the accusation of false consciousness back onto the researcher. In fact, it is our opinion that various kinds of research are valuable - that in which research questions are brought to the field by the researcher, that in which they are determined collaboratively with research "subjects", as well as, action research done by practitioners in which "researchers" are not included. Hopefully, rather than a one-best-model approach to research, purpose will determine where a study falls on the continuum of researcher/subject participation. For

example, collaborative action research appears to have great promise as an inservice strategy for practitioners (Stevens, 1986; Lieberman 1986), whereas naturalistic evaluation will tend to seek "an emically-oriented description of events and an etically sculptured set of explanations of adaptive and maladaptive behavior" (Fetterman, 1986).

In the field of educational administration, practitioners and researchers often tend to listen more to the latest ideologically-oriented reports emanating from Washington and buzz words from the business community (currently "excellence" and "competitiveness") than they do to each other. As this paper has attempted to illustrate, when researchers and practitioners negotiate meaning they listen to each other and their tacit biases and perceptual frames become apparent. In our view, this not only leads to better research and a closing of the theory/practice gap, but also to a much needed cross-fertilization of ideas within the field of educational administration.

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